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NSC Briefing-LAOS

Latest reports on the military situation in Laos give a somewhat less pessimistic picture than that of a week ago.

The invasion of Laos involved three Viet Minh divisions and elements of a fourth. Now, two of these divisions are believed withdrawing to Tonkin. This move may have been forced by a shortage of supplies resulting from overextended lines of communication.

Luang Prabang now appears to have a good chance of holding out. It may not even be attacked. The French have some 4,000 men there in five battalions, two of which are Moroccan, one Foreign Legion, one French and one Laotian. Only five Viet Minh battalions are known to be nearby. The problem of defense is difficult because the town ~~is on the west side of the Mekong,~~ ^{and} while the airfield lies ^{opposite} on ~~the other~~ side of ^a the river.

At the Plaine des Jarres, the French have seven well-entrenched battalions (about 5,600). Four of these are Foreign Legion, and the rest are part Laotian and part French. Viet Minh strength there is believed to be one division (about 10,000). It could overrun the French only at great cost.

Recent reports say some Viet Minh elements are moving south toward Paksane or Vientiane. Paksane is defended by three battalions, Vientiane by two. Most of these forces are believed to be Laotian troops.

The bulk of the Viet Minh forces were not thrown against Laos. They stayed in Tonkin. Reinforced by the two divisions now believed moving out of Laos, they are a serious threat to French defenses in the Delta. They could also attack the French garrison at Na San, which is still dependent on supply by air. Guerrilla activity inside the Delta continues at a high rate.

The whole fighting area, however, will be drenched by rain in about 10 days. This will continue all summer and severely hamper military operations. Probably the Viet Minh never planned to go as far as we feared and are now stopping to prepare for next fall's campaign.

The Viet Minh, without advancing farther, now has won an important strategic military victory. It is true that French forces are intact. But the enemy is now established on several important Mekong tributaries. It already controlled the Red River drainage system in Tonkin. Now large supplies can be built up in either or both areas for future drives against the dispersed French forces. The vulnerability of the latter is increased by the deficiencies of French intelligence, which has proved in this campaign to be very weak.

Great political gains have also accrued from the Communist successes in Laos. Besides giving Viet Minh followers a big morale uplift, these successes reacted against the French not only in Laos but in all the neighboring countries.

French-Laotian relations have been strained by France's failure to appeal the aggression to the UN. Laotian confidence

in the French has been shaken by the French inability to defend their country. If the Viet Minh were to take Luang Prabang or penetrate to the Thai border, many leaders would probably go over to the Communists' "Free Laos" Government.

Probably taking advantage of the Laotian situation, the King of Cambodia provoked a crisis in French-Cambodian relations. The King recently threatened revolt unless the French gave his country virtual independence. He suddenly became a national hero with the support of all Cambodian leaders. He is now in Tokyo, and is reluctant to return until the French grant his demands. Meanwhile, the French are offering some concessions, which will probably be grudgingly accepted but will not eliminate the basic frictions here.

In Vietnam, surface reactions have been mild. Undoubtedly Viet Minh prestige is much greater. And Vietnamese nationalists are comparing Bao Dai's inertia unfavorably with the strong stand taken by the Cambodian King.

The French have failed to take advantage of the opportunity offered by the invasion of Laos to disprove Viet Minh propaganda that it is fighting a civil war against French imperialism. Instead, last week the French appointed die-hard colonial administrators as High Commissioners to the three Indochinese states. This was a step backward psychologically in the struggle to get the nationalistic Vietnamese to support the war effort.

The Thais are greatly concerned over a possible uprising of the 50,000 Vietnamese in north Thailand to join the invaders of Laos. Thai leaders are disturbed that the West may not fully understand the threat to their country and Premier Phibun told our Ambassador he regretted the aggression had not been put before the UN. Phibun is also worried that the attack on Laos is somehow connected with the newly-established Thai Autonomous Government in south Yunnan.

The Chinese Communists, who may be masterminding all these developments, have remained well in the background. They are sending supplies across the border to the Viet Minh at a faster rate than several months ago. But until the middle of last week they took no public note of the invasion of Laos. Now they describe it, as Viet Minh propaganda does, as the work of a Laotian People's Liberation Army.

They have recently made sharp propaganda attacks on Thailand, which they accuse of sending troops into Laos to help the French. Undoubtedly this line is intended to discourage the Thais from doing anything to aid the French. Certainly the Chinese Communists would like to see the government of Thailand overthrown, but they don't seem to be planning any immediate action to this end. The Communists in the Far East like to work through native "Liberation" armies; as yet there is no "liberation" movement in Thailand for them to support.